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TEENAGE GIRLS CARRY WATER FROM A BOREHOLE, IN SOUTHERN MALAWI. THREE TEENAGE GIRLS CARRYING COLORFUL BUCKETS OF WATER ON A DIRT ROAD, RETURNING FROM THEIR JOURNEY TO THE NEAREST BOREHOLE, IN BALAKA DISTRICT, SOUTHERN MALAWI, UNDER A BLUE SKY WITH CLOUDS. PHOTO: GUIDO DINGEMANS, DE EINDREDACTIE / GETTY

In Africa, the change is palpable. In NZ it's starting to hurt, too. So enough with the Smart Alec approach to climate

Bronwyn Hayward | Guest writer

**The excuses are feeble and unacceptable. We need to take sincere, authentic, practical and innovative action to reduce climate change gas emissions at home, writes Bronwyn Hayward.**

*An Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Canterbury and a lead author for the International Panel for Climate Change special report on reducing climate change to 1.5 degrees, Bronwyn Hayward was in Ethiopia last week as an expert adviser to the IPCC for the planning meetings for the next six years of climate assessment reporting. Her comments here are made in her own personal capacity and do not represent the views of the IPCC.*

Here in Africa, weather is not just a topic for small talk or research. In a region where half the population is younger than 19 it is often a matter of life and death. This year Somalia, South Sudan, Nigeria and Yemen face the very real possibility of an unprecedented four-nation famine, as the impact of drought, exacerbated by conflict and government failure, threatens the lives of 20 million people.

It was fitting therefore that climate and social scientists from around the world met last week in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia to plan the next six years of climate research assessments. Next week in Bonn, Germany, government representatives will gather to prepare a “rule book” of how countries should meet the Paris 2015 agreement, which committed signatory countries to reducing greenhouse gases with the aim of holding the world’s temperature at less than 2 degrees warming.

As New Zealanders we are becoming used to seeing climate disasters unfold at a distance, but even here it is [getting personal](#), as severe floods and fires threaten the homes of people we know, or when long droughts affect local

farming communities leaving mental ill health, domestic violence and rising levels of debt in its wake.

Climate change is no longer just something that will happen “in the future”. Our climate is changing now, and we can already begin to see its impacts. This was a key finding of the last IPCC round of research reports. For example, we now know that between 1880 and 2012, the average global temperature increased by 0.85C, while global average sea levels have already risen by 19 centimetres since 1901.

So far, so grim. But informed by the IPCC science, the world then turned around and did a remarkable thing: it agreed in Paris in 2015 that climate change is real and is happening. Many nations signed up to the effort to try and halt temperatures from rising more than 2 degrees overall.





CATTLE HERDER BOYS IN NORTHERN ETHIOPIA. PHOTO: BRONWYN HAYWARD

Why is this target so important? It is the upper limit that science suggests is safe. Beyond that, if the world keeps getting warmer, the impact of associated severe storms, droughts and other unpredictable climate events may become so frequent and so serious, they risk overwhelming our abilities to cope.

But how do we keep global temperatures down? As everyone knows, it's hard enough to make pro-climate changes in our everyday lives. How on

Earth do we hold governments, industries and big investors to account? Researchers at Motu have produced a handy little [tool](#) that shows ways we can significantly reduce our own climate footprints every day. This matters: New Zealanders have the fifth-highest climate footprint per person in the world, higher than in countries such as the United Kingdom.

We can make quite big individual greenhouse gas emission impacts just by cutting back on the number of times we use a car or eat red meat each week. There are things we can debate about the Motu tool – for example, why isn't reducing dairy intake included, and buying a hybrid car isn't always helpful if it has a “rebound” effect, which means we start to travel much further, smug in the knowledge we own a fancy, low-emissions car – but it is a good start, showing how food and transport contribute significantly to our climate impacts.

Nevertheless, it remains hard for individuals and families to start making real changes, and to stick at it. It's even harder to get governments, our employers, and large international investors to cut back their emissions from associated fossil fuel use, mining and intensive agriculture.

So how is New Zealand doing? Are we reducing our national greenhouse gas emissions? The answer is no. Not really, in fact hardly at all.

As New Zealanders, when we are criticised about our climate laziness, our immediate defence tends to be to say one of two things. “We are so small as a country, we contribute very little to the overall situation, so we can't make a difference!” Or, “We are so dependent on agriculture – it makes up about half our overall emissions – so it will be very hard and expensive for us to change our ways.”



But being small never stopped us from tackling tough goals before, whether it was winning the vote for women or winning a world cup. Why would it stop us from taking climate change cuts seriously? And “too expensive”, really? Governments may find the future will be very expensive if they don’t act now and face court action later for failure to act on known risks, let alone the costs of trying to adapt to and fix up the long term impact of serious and increased flooding and droughts.



TEENAGE GIRLS CARRY WATER FROM A BOREHOLE, IN SOUTHERN MALAWI. PHOTO: GUIDO DINGEMANS, DE EINDREDACTIE / GETTY

To be fair, we got off to a good start on cutting greenhouse gases. Our government was among the first wave of countries to sign the Paris

Agreement after 2015 but then we got well, a bit “Smart Alec” about the whole climate thing.

First off we said we’d cut our greenhouse gas emissions by 30% compared to emission levels in 2005. That sounds quite a lot right? Some reports even said we’d agreed to “slash” our emissions with this target. But here is the bad news. In real terms New Zealand’s net greenhouse gas emissions have actually [increased](#) by a whopping 54 percent between 1990 and 2014. Secondly we have hardly done anything real and concrete to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions.

**S**o how do we get away with it? While other countries are busy setting targets and doing things like investing in low-carbon public transport and requiring new low-carbon building regulations and even requiring new products sold in their country to have long-life warranties, how has New Zealand avoided taking real practical action? The answer is that for many years we just bought “carbon credits”, [especially from Ukraine and Russia](#), and relied on past forestry projects to make it look like we were taking action. Then it all went a bit pear shaped, we had to start cutting down mature trees and we are not planting more at anything like the rate we need to. Very significantly, it also turned out most of the Ukraine and Russian carbon credits we bought may not have been generated by real greenhouse gas cutting projects elsewhere in the world or were less effective than they were claimed to be.

Not a lot of New Zealanders realise how serious the situation is. The influential think tank Carbon Tracker has [rated](#) our response “inadequate” and embarrassingly it has also described New Zealand as relying on “creative accounting” to try to meet our global responsibilities for reducing greenhouse gases.

In 2015 the New Zealand government finally stopped buying Ukrainian and Russian carbon credits, but it has kept a stockpile of these “left over” “dodgy” credits, which it presumably wants to use to nominally meet our new Paris target for 2030. There have been no other real climate gas reduction actions announced yet.



A DETAIL FROM THE COVER ILLUSTRATION FOR THE MORGAN FOUNDATION ‘CLIMATE CHEATS’ REPORT

So what next? If as a nation we are going to be fair to other people in the face of rising temperatures, droughts and severe storms we do have to start doing “real stuff”, actually reducing greenhouse gas emissions now, if we have any hope of cutting our greenhouse gases by 40 to 70 percent by mid-century and having greenhouse gas zero emissions by 2100.



We need to start to take sincere, authentic, practical and innovative action to reduce climate gas emissions at home. Yes we are small, but we are not “too small”. Yes it will be hard but it’s not “too hard”. Yes there are strong lobby groups [resisting change](#) but, these groups don’t represent all farmers or [all businesses](#). There are many people across New Zealand who are uneasy and unhappy about our present lack of action. And besides, our precious world and its remarkable children are worth the effort it will take us to make serious cuts to greenhouse gas emissions – starting now.

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